

MontCo Anti-Hunger Network brings understanding of ethnic diversity to area food pantries

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Nelly Jimenez, Executive Director and CEO, ACLAMO Family Centers of Norristown and Pottstown (left) and Nadja Mummery, Client Services Manager, Manna on Main Street, Lansdale (center) listen to and advise food pantry manger, Phil Holtje, Mitzvah Food Program, Bala Cynwyd (right) at a MontCo Anti-Hunger Network Peer Learning Circle held in Colmar on May 31.

MontCo Anti-Hunger Network (MAHN) convened a group of 30 service providers and representatives from partner organizations to explore ways to make food pantries more welcoming to ethnically diverse community residents. "Our food pantry members are in the business of helping people keep their families fed. A big part of doing that well means understanding and overcoming reasons why those who need our assistance may not be comfortable coming to us for it" said Paula Schafer, MAHN administrator.

MontCo Anti-Hunger Network is a nonprofit organization providing resources to 32 food pantries that help feed more than 15,000 households across the county each year. Friday's instructional event, known as a Peer Learning Circle, is one of several that MAHN hosts each year to keep food pantry personnel up to speed on best practices in program management and client engagement.

What's the biggest challenge in serving people from other cultures? Hidden rules. "Hidden rules are our unspoken expectations about behavior that are difficult for people from other countries to know about" said meeting speaker Nadja Mummery, Client Services Manager at Manna on Main Street in Lansdale. "For instance, we may tell someone there is no limit on the number of melons they're allowed to have. If we get upset when they take six instead of two

or three, they've broken our hidden rule that there really is a limit." Expectations for conduct while waiting in line and waiting for a turn to choose food are also examples where hidden rules can cause problems.

Likewise, where language barriers exist, nonverbal communication becomes a crucial element of the interaction equation. Program participants who do not understand the spoken words of service providers rely much more on facial expressions and body language to judge where they stand with them. Meeting speaker Nelly Jimenez, Executive Director & CEO of ACLAMO Family Centers in Norristown and Pottstown, said "You don't have to be fluent in the language your client speaks to make them feel welcome. Your smile, kind tone, and patience will make up for what you cannot say." Product signage posted in the languages spoken by program participants is also helpful.

Information that service providers require for participation in their pantry program can also create barriers to accessing food assistance. Jimenez recommended that food pantries take a close look at their client intake process. "If you ask for more personal information than the law requires, you may be excluding the very people who need your help the most" she said.

In addition to Peer Learning Circles, MAHN operates a Retail Food Rescue Program that provided Montgomery County's emergency food network with more than 148,000 pounds of food last year. They are also conducting a pilot project that connects low income seniors living in subsidized housing to online food pantry ordering and order delivery. To learn about these programs and more, visit the website at www.montcoantihunger.org